

## William Gladstone and the Vocabulary of Homer

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GRS, "Gladstone as linguist", *J. of Literary Semantics* 42.1–29, 2013; <[www.grsampson.net/AGal.pdf](http://www.grsampson.net/AGal.pdf)>. GRS and Anna Babarczy, *Grammar Without Grammaticality: growth and limits of grammatical precision*, De Gruyter (Berlin), 2014, ch. 14.

A slice of history, but with a message for today:

for intellectual progress, *producing* original ideas is not enough. There must also be audiences ready to *receive* them. Otherwise, your ideas will be misinterpreted ...

- no matter how distinguished you are
- and no matter how stupid the misinterpretation makes you seem!

William Ewart Gladstone (1809–1898): MP from 1832, first entered government 1834; Chancellor of Exchequer 1852–5, 1859–66; leader of Liberal Party 1867–74; Prime Minister 1868–74, 1880–5, 1886, 1892–4.

G's studies of Homeric Greek language (i.e. *Iliad* and *Odyssey*):

*Studies on Homer and the Homeric Age*, vol. 3, Oxford University Press, 1858

*Juventus Mundi*, Macmillan, 1869

"The colour-sense", *The Nineteenth Century* 2.366–88, 1877

"On epithets of movement in Homer", *The Nineteenth Century* 5.463–87, 1879.

G thought Greeks were colour-blind:

Guy Deutscher, *Through the Language Glass* (Arrow Books, London, 2011): G "argued that H and his contemporaries perceived the world in something closer to black and white than to full Technicolor" (p. 30); "what G was proposing was nothing less than universal colour blindness among the ancient Greeks" (p. 37).

Deutscher not alone:

Grant Allen, *The Colour-Sense, its origin and development: an essay in comparative psychology* (Trübner, London, 1879): "the main point of their [G and another's] hypothesis" began with "an absolute blindness to colour in the primitive man"

William Eddy, "The evolution of a new sense", *Popular Science Monthly* 16.66–71, 1879:

"Mr G ... does not maintain that everyone in H's time was color-blind. He simply [claims] that, we will say, where one person is color-blind now, nine were color-blind then."

...

John Gage, *Colour and Meaning: art, science and symbolism* (Thames & Hudson, London, 2000): "G's belief in the colour-blindness of the Ancient Greeks"

Barry Cole, review of McIntyre, *Colour Blindness*, in *Clinical and Experimental Optometry* 86.194, 2003: G "concluded they had defective colour vision"

Jordanna Bailkin, "Color problems: work, pathology, and perception in modern Britain", *International Labor and Working-Class History* 68.93–111, 2005: G "argue[d] that H and his contemporaries had been effectively color blind"

etc. etc.

(According to myth, Homer was wholly blind – but that’s a side-issue. *Iliad* and *Odyssey* a “team effort”; *some* contributors could certainly see, the qn is whether they could see colours.)

Gladstone: when H uses apparent colour-words, they apply to things that don’t share a colour e.g. πορφύρεος (later Greek, “purple/dark red”):  
blood, dark cloud, wave of river when disturbed, wave of sea, disturbed sea, rainbow ...  
Sea regularly described as οἴνοψ, literally “wine-looking”.  
But blood, wine *red*: sea *blue/green*!

1858: “H’s perceptions of the prismatic colours, or colours of the rainbow ... were ... vague and indeterminate”. “H seems to have had ... principally, a system in lieu of colour, founded upon light and upon darkness”.

did this mean colour-blindness?

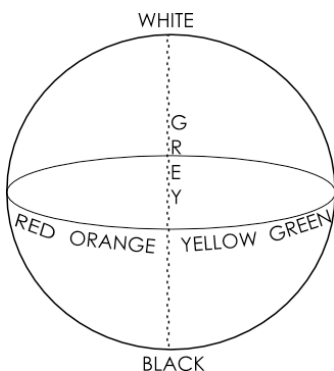
1858: “Are we to suppose a defect in [H’s] organization, or in that of his countrymen?” **No**: “[we are not] to suppose that ... he bore, in the particular point, a crippled nature; but rather we are to learn that the perceptions so easy and familiar to us are the result of a slow traditional growth in knowledge and in the training of the human organ”.

– Child’s learning doesn’t begin with formal schooling, but includes much “insensible training, which begins from the earliest infancy, and which precedes by a great interval all the systematic, and even all the conscious, processes of education” – we have learned a lot before we start school. To linguists, obvious (mother-tongue acquisition), but in 1850s needed saying. We think we have “always” known the colours, but we had to learn them.

1877: “I **rejected** the supposition, that [H’s use of ‘colour words’] was due to any defect in his individual organisation ... Colour-blindness proper ... appears to partake of the nature of organic defect ... painters know that there is an education of the eye for colour in the individual. The proposition, which I desire to suggest, is that this education subsists also for the race.” – Whole societies, as well as individuals, have to *learn* to identify colours.

1879: “It is a matter of interest to consider as kindred topics [i.e. related to the topic of H’s unusual ‘colour’ terminology] the manner in which [H] appreciated other visual phenomena, such as those of form and movement”. H’s vocabulary rich in words for rapid movement but barren in words for slow movement: “I do not recollect that [H] anywhere distinguishes majestic and stately movement from such as is merely slow”.

So what is going on with the Homeric “colour” terms?



longitude = *hue* (red – orange – yellow – green – blue ...)

latitude = *lightness* (white ... black)

distance from central axis = *saturation* (grey ... vivid colour)

21st c. vocabularies treat *hue* as central. Homer: *saturation* central.

πορφύρεος ?= (*dark and*) *high saturation* (any hue)

(wave of sea: vivid blue; flat sea in sunshine, little colour)

But if G didn't think H was colour-blind, why not say so explicitly?

1877: “[When G wrote his 1858 book] The curious phenomena of colour-blindness had then been very recently set forth by Dr George Wilson” [in *Researches on Colour-Blindness*, 1855]  
 – Most people had never heard of colour-blindness, and that included G.

What Gladstone *did* believe:

- (1) chaotic-looking “primitive languages” have structures of their own – the chaos is in our perception of them
- (2) differences between languages may reflect different ways of experiencing/understanding the world
- (3) properties which an exotic language treats as jointly contributing to the meaning of a word may be properties which, for a European language, have no natural relationship
- (4) abstract structural features of a language may correlate with non-linguistic aspects of the speakers' culture

Linguists commonly suppose these ideas were new in the 20th c.:

- (1) e.g. Franz Boas: “examples of American languages have often been brought forward to show that the accuracy of their pronunciation is much less than that found in the languages of the civilized world ... this view is based largely on the fact that certain sounds that occur in American languages are interpreted by observers sometimes as one European sound, sometimes as another.” But this is symmetrical: “our own sounds are misinterpreted [by American Indians] in similar manner ... The alternation of the sounds is clearly an effect of perception through the medium of a foreign system of phonetics” (Introduction to the *Handbook of American Indian Languages*, 1911)  
 “older grammars [of American Indian languages] ... are modelled strictly on the Latin scheme, which obscures the characteristic psychological categories of Indian languages ... Besides the greater or lesser development of categories that are parallel to our own, many new ones appear ...” (Introduction to the *International J. of American Linguistics*, vol. 1, 1917).
- (2) e.g. Edward Sapir: “the ‘real world’ is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group ... The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.” (“The status of linguistics as a science”, 1929)  
 – for Homer, blood and sea-wave visually similar; for us, very different.

cf. Gladstone, 1858: “[H's] mind never had before it any of those processes, simple as they are to all who are familiar with them, of multiplication, subtraction, or division”; “[H] has not even the words necessary to enable him to say, ‘This house is five times as large as that.’”

(Sapir believed speakers were “very much at the mercy” of their language, but G knew that speakers are capable of going beyond the categories provided by their mother tongue – and G was right. After Homer, the Greeks invented maths!)

- (3) Harold Conklin: the meanings of Hanunóo “colour terms” combine visual features with non-visual properties such as wet/dry. (“Hanunóo colour categories”, *Southwestern J. of Anthropology*, 1955, and much anthologized.) To Europeans, irrational; to Hanunóo rational, because the features jointly distinguish fresh/edible foodstuffs from withered/inedible.

Gladstone, 1858: χλωρός is “pale green” but only partly refers to visual appearance. “Next to paleness, [χλωρός] serves chiefly for freshness, i.e. as opposed to what is stale or withered: a singular combination with the former sense”.

[NB “singular” in 19th c. = “odd, surprising” in 21st c. English.]

- (4) Correlation between features of a language and other features of society is a *late* 20th c. idea. (Sapir believed the opposite: *Language*, 1921, “When it comes to linguistic form, Plato walks with the Macedonian swineherd, Confucius with the head-hunting savages of Assam.”)

Peter Trudgill (*Sociolinguistic Typology*, 2011): “different types of human society produce different types of language” – e.g. languages of isolated societies are complex languages.

Gladstone, hue not important for Homer because:

1858: “The materials ... for a system of colour did not offer themselves to H’s vision as they do to ours.”

1869: “much of our varied experience in colour is due to chemistry, and to commerce, which brings to us the productions of all the regions of the world. Mere Nature, at any one spot, does not present to us a full and well-marked series of the principal colours such as to be habitually before the mind’s eye.”

(Even *dyeing* was an exotic technology for the Ancient Greeks; no postboxes, road signs, plastic toys, ... )

- Gladstone for much of life was widely-admired leader of the largest empire in world history. Yet even in his case, people preferred to interpret him as believing an absurdity, rather than follow him in thinking new thoughts. So what hope for the rest of us?!